

## IN THE WILDERNESS.

A Day's Experience on the Skirmish Line in the Brush.

The Story of a Little Volunteer Scouting Party.

A Fine Difference Between Warfare and Assassination by Which a Life Was Spared.

The Lonely Road and Dead "Johnny"—A Confederate Charge.

Written for the Republican.

Beating the bush for an enemy who does not choose to show himself until he can get a telling crack at you decidedly comes under the head of excitement. Pursuing this occupation in the jungle of the wilderness, with no knowledge of the precise point from which the blow would come, yet knowing absolutely that it must come from somewhere, we pushed deeper into the forest.

"What the devil is the matter with you?" I inquired. "How did you get hung up like that?" "I stepped me upon your dress and gaiters, mit mein heit!"

"I should think you had struck a box of fishhooks," I remarked. "I guess I'll have to cut off a few of those amber locks. How do you like that, Dutchy?"

"Vell, gut him!" replied the phlegmatic Teuton, and I soon relieved him from duress, leaving him to find his gun, which had disappeared in the dense undergrowth, I hurried on after the command.

Off to the left rose the ceaseless roar of the fight, so near now that the crackling of individual pieces could be distinguished, but as yet nothing was visible in front but a mass of foliage, low on the ground, and here and there the gnarled trunk of a tree rising like the shaft of a column to support the canopy above.

The advance of our line was indicated by a multitude of local commotions on the surface of the matted undergrowth, as one can trace on a grassy plain the progress of a mole underground. At length, when we penetrated to a point on a line with the firing, words were passed along to halt, and so far as appearances indicated the forest was untenanted, save by the crickets whose natural home it was. A few birds were visible, hopping about among the branches in a dazed sort of fashion, as if what little sense they had was humbled by the awful voice of battle that rolled along the air in a great, unbroken wave.

"This begins to get interesting," said Capt. D., seating himself on an old log beside me. "We are up to the neck in firing, and everything here looks as peaceful as a country graveyard. Have you seen anything on the right?" "Nothing but brush and briars and—"

"Chug-a-rug!—chug-a-rug!—bang! whirr-r-r-r!" and a shell went flying through the trees, exploding with a tremendous report just behind the line and sending the jagged fragments whirling in all directions.

"Gott in himmel! Is ish das?" exclaimed my German friend, who had just come up. "Only a shell, Dutchy," replied the captain, laughing outright at the look of pure amazement on the face of the man. "Lie down, or the next one may grind you up into sausage meat."

"Hey, captain! here's a road," called out one of the men who had gone forward to do a little scouting on his own account, "and here's a dead 'Johnny'; he's been elated over the head with a sabre."

If in this case the road was a road, the road and the man were effectively concealed from our view until we reached the margin of the highway. It was one of the road ways which afford the only convenient means of traversing the forest, and it was here that this section of God's foot-stool, originally but little more than a trail, was now cut up and indented with hoof and wheel tracks.

In this desperate campaign human lives were expended with a liberality that was simply frightful. Human bodies, fresh and in all stages of decomposition, could be found almost anywhere in the eastern counties of the Old Dominion, and one wandering alone in the soft moonlight might at any moment be confronted by a grinning skull or the dim tracery of a bleached human skeleton.

At the close of this same battle of the wilderness my regiment marched over a part of the field on which some of the fiercest fighting had been done. It was at night and we were compelled to pick our way through a body of troops who were stretched at full length in a brief rest among the unburied dead. As we passed along, here and there a head was raised from the ground to view the silent column moving by, and occasionally a curse was thrown at the owner of a foot which had inadvertently disturbed one of the exhausted sleepers. Beyond these evidences of life there was nothing to distinguish the living from the dead. It reminded me of excursions I had made even the night before, when, after a wild plum, when, after having shaken the over-ripe fruit upon the ground, we called the sound from the rotten, and found that what we took was but a small proportion of what we left.

The slaughter of a whole battle field is too large for the expenditure of a proportionate amount of the horror we experience on viewing the mangled remains of one individual.

In the one case it is too great for concentration; in the other the view is smaller and the appeal more direct. From this cause, I imagine, proceeded the feeling with which we gazed upon the now nameless wail of human agony stretched in its blood at our feet.

"A reb cavalryman cut down on the run," said Capt. D. "Look out, boys! there comes another shell!"

He had heard the report of the gun, and knew the messenger would be but a moment later than the herald which announced it. We threw ourselves flat on the dust of the narrow road as the missile, with a harsh shriek, passed directly over our heads and dashed into the undergrowth, where it exploded with a sharp crack.

"They are getting our range, but I don't think they can see in this brush," observed the captain.

"It's mighty short range," said Lieut. K.; "that gun can't be more than 300 yards away."

"Oh, I suppose their line runs out over there, and they're banging their shells in here to let us know they're on the look out for us."

"Back to your places, men!" ordered Capt. D. to the ten or a dozen who had pushed forward to the road. "Lieut. K., bring the line

forward to the edge of the bushes and halt them there."

While the officer was scrambling through the brush to execute his mission, the captain turned to me and said:

"Don't like this business at all. Things are too quiet in front to suit us. We are rather under than over our own line of battle, and if we once cross this road I don't think many of us will get back."

"There are your orders, though," I replied. "I'm afraid to go into their infernal line, do you?"

"Oh, pshaw! It isn't a question of courage. You know that, so far as that is concerned, I'd rather be just now under my mother's belt, chewing gum, than to be squatting on this road here, expecting every moment to have three or four thousand 'Johnnies' on my back, screaming and clawing like hellions."

"The 'that' was a tremendous yell from the left that rose shrill and clear above the deep roar of musketry, and it was immediately answered by a ringing cheer.

"That's a reb charge. If they make ground we'll have to light out of this lively."

As a matter of fact we were in a critical position, and though our action could have but little effect on the result of the battle, we were directly interested in the result to us as individuals. We listened intently for the retrogression of the firing in either direction.

For a few moments it receded toward our rear, showing an advantage gained for the hour, but our line could not be allowed to fall back many yards when a defiant union cheer rang through the woods and the firing moved back to its former position.

The bushes behind us rustled and snapped, and a long line of flushed, eager faces peered out into the road.

"By George!" exclaimed the captain as he looked into the brave, expectant faces; "I've half a mind to put the boys in and go for that gun. What do you think of it?"

"What would you do with it provided you got it?" inquired Lieut. K. "It would take till 3 o'clock next week to get it through this brush; and I'll bet a dollar and sixty-three cents (this was the lieutenant's favorite sum) that this gun isn't there without a good support."

"I've got an idea," I volunteered, feeling as proud as Columbus when he first sighted the lights on Guanahani; "send a squad down the road, and I'll guarantee they go far enough getting all the information they can lug back here!"

"That's business," said Capt. D., "take as many men as you want and drive ahead."

The appointment of the smelling committee, but had not been expected to be selected as chairman. My idea did not seem quite as important as it had when I brought it forward, but as there was no such thing, the circumstances, as a declaration of the honor, I proceeded to carry out my instructions. Picking out three men, of whose quickness of eye and ear I had previous knowledge, I headed the procession and moved down the road.

A few paces to the left the track curved slightly to the right, and on both sides there were very dense as a wall. Standing on tiptoe and looking to the right the eye glanced along a uniform surface of green leaves that quivered under the concussion of the air, protruding the leaves of the ferns, and at intervals of a few paces each, the face of a uniform soldier and the dark muzzle of his rifle looked out to the front, but these evidences of the presence of friends served only to make the solitude more oppressively felt.

The road was a dark, heavy road, as if saturated with venous blood. The sunlight looked in on this trench cut through the thick undergrowth with an unnatural yellow glare, and the shadows of the ferns, yellow and portentous inside their clear-cut borders.

"Hallo! where now, Lieutenant?" called out a guarded voice as we passed along near the left flank of our skirmish line. It was the captain of the other company on duty with us.

"Scouting for information. Have you seen anything down here?"

"Only a few wounded men of our's and one reb with a hole through his shoulder. They were running toward the end about a couple of hundred yards from here; right over there," pointing to the left—"and the Johnnies' line overlaps ours; but you can't see anything. The brush is thicker than hair on a dog's back."

"Where does this road go?"

"It curves sharp to the front at that turn," he replied, indicating with his finger the point a few yards ahead, where the track crossed the highway again, and he turned to browse. "You'll find something around there easy enough!"

"Shall I send you back word when I find them?"

"No; no; we'll hear you when you get it," was the significant response.

At the turn we passed the last man, keeping guard with eye and gun on the narrow passage.

"The boys," said I, "you've got to look sharp and act quick. You, Rowland, come with me. [He was an old deer hunter from the woods from the upper Delaware river, and his eyesight was as keen as that of a hawk.] The other two keep back and I'll take it. The other two keep back and I'll take it. The other two keep back and I'll take it."

I need not deny that the service was of such a nature that I felt a little flutter of nervousness, but the men with me I knew to be absolutely without fear, and to have betrayed the least desire to shirk would have brought upon me a disgrace which no officer would willingly court—the contempt of brave men under his command. There was, beside, an excitement in the thing which kept the pulse full and color in the cheek.

Steps were cautiously on the red earth as if we were treading on a carpet of fire. The place, we moved forward. For a distance of possibly seventy-five yards the road ran nearly straight, and in this space not a living thing was in sight. Looking down that bare stretch of highway was like standing on the edge of time and gazing into eternity. The actions of my companion so interested me that after we had traveled a few yards I lost almost all sense of the duty we were on in watching him. With head up, and an air of resting in the hollow of his left arm, he strode on at an easy gait. I noticed that he gave little attention to the road in front, but his restless eye was continually roving over the surface of foliage to the right and left, darting from one point to another with the rapidity of a flash of light. Moving along apparently without the least tension of a muscle, every sense, I knew, was on the alert. Not a twig, nor a leaf, nor a single insect, escaped him. Even the canopy of branches and leaves overhead came under his surveillance. At intervals of about a rod he raised himself on his toes and swept a glance around as if he were waiting for a glimpse of a concealed enemy. It is an old, trite simile that momentary seem hours. To me, while waiting for that which was to come, each instant of time dragged its slow length out almost to an eternity. In the musing of my mind I was aware of the local sounds were audible, and a lone voice of visible organs, and that as yet unlocated sense which manifested its operations in our presentiments, were to be depended upon.

"Lieb, when the sensation of suspense had become all but unendurable, and I was about to step out into the roadway at all

risks, the bushes bordering the passage at the crest of the slope were violently agitated, and a mounted confederate officer leaped his horse into the open space.

Rowland's piece came to his shoulder quick as thought, as he had drawn it on many a deer hunt, but just before he pulled the trigger he looked over at me for permission to speed the death shot. It was a splendid proof of the power of discipline and self-control; and it was also a Providential dispensation to the confederate, for Rowland never missed.

In an instant a score of thoughts swept across my mind: We were not there to kill, necessarily, but to observe. To shoot would be just to prove and perhaps defeat our own object. One man's life could not affect the struggle. It looked too much like assassination; and then, he was a splendid specimen of physical manhood, and if I gave my consent to his killing, I should regret it forever. I think it was the latter sentiment which influenced the negative shake of the head by which I telegraphed to Rowland my desire that he should remain unharmed.

If that officer is still alive and remember the incident, he may now know why the "Yanks" he met that day gave him the life. All at once the thought occurred to me: "Why can't we take him prisoner?"

His horse upon which he sat with the grace of an accomplished equestrian was a magnificent black, deep in the chest and light of limb as a gazelle. Not more than twenty-five yards away, while invisible ourselves, we had been watching him, and he was now within easy detail. The horseman was looking intently along the road to our rear, as if he momentarily expected the appearance of a union column swinging around the curve. In his right hand he held a cocked navy revolver, while his left clutched the bridle by which the beast was governed.

With the above mentioned thought foremost in my mind, I called to Rowland: "At the same time raising his revolver, with the muzzle bearing directly on the position I occupied. Before a further motion could be made the sharp crack of Rowland's rifle parted the air and the noble animal dropped as if struck with a sledge hammer. His rider was entangled in the furniture of the saddle, and appeared to be partly under him.

"Forward, boys!" I yelled, "and bring him in!"

We were all four in the road, dashing madly toward the struggling group, when out of the bushes came the head of a confederate column.

Into the brush, every man of you!" I shouted, and the column, which was composed of unexpected change in the situation, and as we dived into the shrubbery half a dozen bullets clipped the leaves about us. At the same time a rattle of musketry from the right and left, and we were relieved of our chief concern now was to get out. This we did before the advancing confederate skirmish line, and upon reaching our own weak force, we were right, which was composed of our own company, fired a rapid volley, and the confederate left, and being rapidly outflanked. Before any damage had been done, however, the woods were warning with a body of our own troops, who came from none of us knew where, and we were relieved of our chief concern now was to get out. This we did before the advancing confederate skirmish line, and upon reaching our own weak force, we were right, which was composed of our own company, fired a rapid volley, and the confederate left, and being rapidly outflanked. 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